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ENGINEERING ENGLISH

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A member of the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education, who had had experience in editing an engineering journal and in teaching English to engineering students, wrote a "letter to the editor" of the monthly *Bulletin* of the Society, in June, 1919. This letter criticized the English of the contributors to the *Bulletin*, and suggested that the engineering professors who write for the *Bulletin* should be more careful of their words and sentences. To give point to his letter, the English teacher cited some sentences from a recent number of the *Bulletin* that were particularly muddled in construction, giving the page number in each instance.

Nothing was heard from his letter for several months, during which new numbers of the *Bulletin* appeared, but without the "letter to the editor." Finally, in November, after the English teacher had made several attempts to find out what had happened to his letter, he was informed by the officials of the Society that objection was taken to the letter's citing of specific instances, since this was being "entirely too personal," and that the letter had not been published because it "dealt in such personalities." The letter was finally published only after the writer of it had removed the exact references to the errors which he criticized.

This incident shows the great difficulty that arises in trying to improve the English of engineers. The Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education ostensibly is working to improve engineering education, and its officers make high-sounding speeches about "broadening the minds" of engineers and "co-operating" with other branches of education, yet it refused free criticism of the English in its *Bulletin*.

The trouble, of course, is not entirely on the side of the engineering professors. The English and engineering departments have

long been incompatible. The engineering colleges complain that the professors of English do not teach the kind of English that the engineering students require. Instead of training young scientists to see language as a wonderful and precise tool of which the possession means power and satisfaction, the English professor too often has disgusted his class by pedantic analyses of dry essays on "The Importance of Dust" or "The Academic Relation between Science and Literature." Or instead of skilfully leading the engineer to discover adventure in reading, frequently the English professor has bored him by parading a Walter Pater or Matthew Arnold personality before a class of young men who want to become Hoovers and Pasteurs.

Too often professors of English in engineering colleges have held toward literature the point of view of the Babu mentioned by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in his *Art of Writing*. They have been "trying all the while to embellish our poor language, to make it more floriferous, more poetical—like the Babu for example who, reporting his mother's death, wrote, 'Regret to inform you, the hand that rocked the cradle has kicked the bucket.' " Such ornamenters of English, continues "Q," say "adverse climatic conditions" when they mean "bad weather"; and "he was conveyed to his place of residence in an intoxicated condition" when they mean "he was carried home drunk." Is it any wonder that the teaching of English in engineering colleges has languished? As one engineering student remarked, "Going to English class is like taking a dose of medicine." So stands the case from the point of view of the engineer.

There is fault, then, on both sides. The engineering departments have repelled suggestions and criticisms about their exceptionally bad English. The English departments have sought to foist literary flourishes and belles-lettres on young men interested in science and adventure. Engineering students should be taught English neither by a floriferous post-impressionist, nor by a dry-as-dust analyst. Perhaps the best type of teacher for this difficult position is an engineering graduate who has developed an interest in literature. Personality should be accounted more important than academic degrees, and experience in engineering journalism

more important than a knowledge of Anglo-Saxon or medieval research. Besides knowing the conventional facts of literature, the successful teacher to engineering students should know something about the history of science. Such a book as Walter Libby's *Introduction to the History of Science* is much more likely to furnish a class of engineering students with the proper perspective and groundwork for wide reading than a text in the history of literature. As Professor C. Alphonso Smith of the United States Naval Academy has pointed out, the young engineer is not at all interested in the history of literature taught for its own sake. Instead of being concerned with variations in the dramas of the Elizabethans, the engineering student is willing to read about Galileo or Descartes or Bacon and their ideas on natural philosophy. As Sir William Osler has suggested, the literature of classical periods can be studied for its bearing on science as well as for its value as belles-lettres. An enormous field of possibilities in teaching has been neglected in this overlooking of the history of science, especially in its application to the needs of engineering students. The old philosophers, from Plato down to modern times, were interested in many of the problems that engage the attention of engineers today—the theory of atoms, the philosophy of mathematics, the explanation of change, the relation between physics and chemistry, etc. It is on such historical theses that a teacher of literature to engineering students should be informed, rather than on the rhyme-schemes of the sonnet or the philology of Chaucer's verbs.

Two opposing schools of thought in our universities need to be reconciled and harmonized—the supporters of the liberal arts and the supporters of applied science. There is need for a broader knowledge on each side as to the good in the other's cause. There is need, likewise, of free criticism and open discussion, coupled with generous tolerance and a more imaginative friendliness. Only by such means can English and engineering be made mutually helpful.